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After Years Off, Women Struggle To Revive Careers

Résumé Gaps, New Technology
Make Transition Difficult;
Clearing Emotional Hurdles

Recruiter's Pop Quiz on CDOs

By ANNE MARIE CHAKER and HILARY STOUT
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Catherine King sat patiently in the office of a Wall Street search firm. She carried her résumé, packed with impressive entries: M.B.A., Stanford University; securities trader, Credit Suisse First Boston; portfolio manager, Chase Manhattan Bank.

But at the end of a 40-minute meeting, the recruiter's assessment was bleak. Ms. King, he concluded, has a 15% chance of getting a job in finance. The problem: almost everything she has going for her, from a recruiter's prospective, ends in 1990. Today she is 50 years old, and with the exception of running some fitness classes, her profession for most of the past 14 years has been stay-at-home mom.




Catherine King

Like Ms. King, many professional women who quit their jobs to raise children are trying to go back -- and they're finding it harder than they ever imagined. The sluggish economy has made jobs scarce for many well-qualified candidates, let alone those with gaps in their résumés. With advances in technology, women who have taken even a few years off likely have fallen behind or feel out-of-touch. The job-hopping of the past decade has meant many of their old professional contacts, mentors and networks are dispersed. And often their families get used to having mom at home and don't relish a change.

Taking time off for family reasons has been a compelling option for women who can afford it. Many mothers say the benefits, especially time spent with their young children, are invaluable. Reversing a nearly 30-year trend, the percentage of mothers in the work force with a child younger than one year old dropped to 55% in 2002 from 59% in 1998, according to the Census Bureau.

But many women ultimately want or need to resume their careers. A recent poll of nearly 500 highly educated women who left their jobs mainly for family reasons found 66% wanted to return to work,

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according to the Center for Work-Life Policy, a New York nonprofit. ([See related article](#)¹.)

Another survey, of more than 600 female graduates of Harvard Business School, found that 96% of graduates in their late 20s were employed. The rate tumbled as the women aged: 71% of those in their late 30s with at least two children were employed. Then employment picked up again; 82.5% of those in their late 40s said they work.

Some women make the transition easily. This week, Brenda Barnes, who left her job as head of PepsiCo's North American beverage business in 1997 to spend more time with her children, returned to work as the No. 2 executive at Sara Lee Corp. But her move isn't typical of the experience of most women.

"Things change so quickly," says Karyn Roberts, 42, who worked in information technology for Ford Motor Co., and International Business Machines Corp. before quitting work after her first child was born in 1997. Now she lives with her husband and two daughters in Vermont, and recently accepted a job teaching a computer course at a community college. Returning to her old field wasn't a viable option, she says: "I need to be able to translate the business needs into a workable IT solution... and I have no idea what's out there anymore."

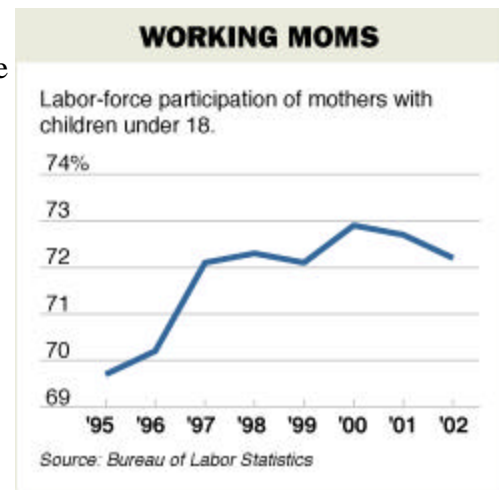
Meeting with a headhunter in March, Ms. King, the former securities trader, found she couldn't answer basic questions about some of today's investment products. "CDOs, do you know what they are?" he asked.

"No," she replied.

"Collateralized debt obligations," the recruiter, Michael Maloney, informed her. She wrote down the term in a notebook, as he continued to ask her to identify other terms, "Credit derivatives, interest-rate derivatives..."

Mr. Maloney, an executive recruiter for more than 20 years, says, "The challenge is not only the gap in her résumé," but the fact that the industry has changed so much since she was last working in it.

Besides playing professional catch-up, mothers trying to re-enter the work force face emotional hurdles. A decade ago, Michelle Abt oversaw a staff of about 40 as a vice president at Chase Manhattan Bank. A nanny arrived at her house in Stamford, Conn., at 6 a.m., and she dashed for the 6:25 commuter train to New York City. She returned home to her family around 7:30 or 8 in the evening. In 1994, after she had her second child, she resigned.



"I quit because I never saw my children," she says. Her husband ramped up a business he owned, and she stayed home and had a third child. "Without a question, it was the right decision for us."

With her youngest now in first grade, she says she's ready to go back to work. "I don't want to just go to

the gym, have lunch with people and redecorate my house."

But when she told her family, "The kids said 'we don't want to be taken care of by a nanny,' " she recalls. So she promised that they wouldn't. "I said, 'I will pick you up from school.' " To do that, Ms. Abt is trying to start her own ceramics business.

Husbands also have mixed feelings. "There's only so much school, class-mother stuff she can do," says David Zuckerberg, an emergency-medicine physician in Waccabuc, N.Y., whose wife, Elisa, just accepted a part-time marketing job. He says he's supportive of that, but wonders how it will "change the way the family operates." Their children, ages 5 and 9, "are used to having their mom at home, and when they're bored they can say, 'Mom, I'm bored, help me not be bored.' "

The pressures of caring for a toddler in the midst of a big trial led Vivian Friedman to quit her job as a prosecutor in the Manhattan district attorney's office in 1985. She was 37. For the next 16 years she poured herself into her daughter's life, attending sporting events and volunteering at her private school. She says she used her legal skills as president of a civic association. In 2001, as her daughter prepared to enter college, Ms. Friedman decided it was time to go back to work.

She mailed 50 letters to prospective employers in New York -- on Sept. 10, 2001. After a delay for spinal surgery, she started looking again in January 2003. Since then, she estimates that she has contacted more than 100 employers -- law firms, banks, other businesses, government offices, even temp agencies.

Last year, she applied for an executive-assistant job. "I'm not above it. I can read mail, write letters, review business plans. I can make coffee," she says. When she arrived for an interview she was asked to take a typing test. She didn't get the job.

Ms. Friedman, 56, now spends hours scouring online job sites. She's meets with headhunters. She scans the newspaper for ideas. "I refuse to accept the fact that I'm not employable," she says. "I always thought it would never be hard for me to go back to work."

Some employers say no matter how strong the case, volunteer work doesn't stack up against years of professional accomplishments -- especially in an era when openings are scarce.

"If an employer uses the criteria 'We will hire the best person for the job,' I think it's very difficult to choose someone who's been out of the work force that long," says Tory Johnson, founder and chief executive of Women For Hire, which pairs job-seekers with recruiters. Applicants sometimes point to their volunteer work, or experience as "head of the household...the women who does everything," she adds. "The theory of it sounds really great, but the reality is it's very difficult."

Many women quit work in their 30s, prime career-building years. By the time they think about going back, they're into their 40s, or older. Women like this "are going to have to be a little realistic -- they don't have the perfect package," says Kevin Ryan, CEO of DoubleClick, a New York computer company. "They're going to have to take a step back" from the salaries and positions they left.

Laura Jeffress, 42, managed a staff as director of international marketing for a sunglass division of Bausch & Lomb in the mid-1990s. She says she left her job -- and a salary of \$100,000 -- in 1996 after she gave birth to her first son.

After a short stint at another company, two more boys and four years at home, Ms. Jeffress decided to go back to work. In January she started interviewing for marketing jobs, but quickly realized she was being considered for positions that were a big step backward.

"It's so devastating to sit there and realize you are talking to someone who would have been your underling," she says.

She was offered an entry-level management post and annual salary of \$40,000. "I said, 'There is no way I can even afford to pay child care on what you just offered me.' "

In frustration, Ms. Jeffress has decided to give up her search for now. Her three sons are eight, four and two. With her husband's work as an attorney, the family has a comfortable-enough income, but they will have to skip some luxuries, including eating out. Last year her oldest son went to two summer camps. This year he won't go to any.

"It's hard to believe that four to six years could damage your career in that way," she says.

Nancy Judson was working as an elementary special-education teacher in Dallas in 1988, when her husband's company transferred him to Portland, Ore. After their first child was born, they decided she would stay home. "We both had working moms," Ms. Judson says. "I wanted to be there and do all those things that my mom couldn't do."

Last year the couple divorced. Ms. Judson, now a 45-year-old mother of three, looked for a job for the first time in over 15 years. Her former field wasn't an option -- she wasn't certified to teach in Oregon, and the special-education profession has changed a lot. "My old terms would be archaic," she says.

She had friends and connections at several major employers, she says. But no one would grant her an interview, not even for a receptionist job. A few months ago, she went to a "panel interview" at a Starbucks. She sat in an Ann Taylor suit answering questions along with 39 other applicants, including a musician and teenagers looking for part-time work. She was hired: 25 hours a week, at minimum wage. "I felt so defeated," she says.

But she took the job. For the past two months, Ms. Judson has been working varied shifts at a suburban Portland Starbucks. She is the lowest in the coffee shop's hierarchy -- a "barista" who works the cash register, operates the espresso machine and mops the bathroom floors. She hopes to work her way up the corporate structure into management.

When women give up their careers to raise children, she says, "you're not thinking 15, 20 years down the road. You're thinking what's best for my kids now." But she cautions, "You don't know what life is going to throw you."

A few companies try to maintain ties with employees who leave for family reasons. Susan Peters, vice president of executive development at General Electric Corp. says the company does so by offering contractual and "very minimal part-time work."

Consulting firm Booz Allen Hamilton offers former female employees small-scale contract work, such as proposal writing, idea development and working with clients, which can be done from home. Deloitte &

Touche LLP, the accounting firm, is planning to launch a "Personal Pursuits" program this year, which will allow employees to take unpaid leave for as long as five years. The firm will run training sessions for those on leave and assign them mentors to stay in touch with them. The company says it hopes to cut down on turnover costs by rehiring people after their leaves.

Catherine King, the one-time Wall Streeter, stayed home after she had her second child. "I had this newborn and a two-and-a-half-year-old who isn't thrilled he has a new brother. A sitter who is overwhelmed with the two....And I want to be home. I thought 'I really want to be with my kids.' " With her husband working as a managing director of a major Wall Street firm, she could afford to quit her job.

During her years at home, she earned a master's degree in Early Childhood Education from New York University "because I wanted to be the world's best mom and it kept my mind active."

Ms. King is finalizing a divorce, but she says that is only one reason she wants to return to a career. Her sons are teenagers now, and she wants to focus on her own ambitions. "I have the ability to put in a ton of energy and time," she says.

In the past few months, Ms. King has tried everything from a six-week career-transition workshop to her ex-husband's connections, and landed interviews at investment banks including Goldman Sachs Group and HSBC. But she hasn't landed a job.

"There's a part of every woman who has had what it takes to succeed on Wall Street that yearns for that type of overachieving applause that you got, and that motherhood does not allow you to have. There's just no applause," she says. "And I miss that."

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